

ARLIS Conference Montreal 1995  
INTERNET Panel  
Ingrid Bachmann, Artist, Professor  
Concordia University, Montreal

I would like to ask you to participate with me in setting the stage for this talk, an exercise or experiment in virtuality, a term that has most likely figured prominently in the discussions over the last few days, and one that requires just a little bit of your imagination.

I am not unaware of the irony for a visual artist with a firm commitment and engagement, both aesthetic and political, in the physical and material world, to speak in the absence of visuals.

So, imagine if you will.....

*A map, circa late eighteenth century, somewhere in the New World. The map begins to burn, from the centre out.*

*Scene 2. Vast plains, an expansive horizon, a fading sunset. Hold that image. From off in the distance, the sound of galloping horses, gradually approaching. Faintly at first, far away, you hear music. You think you recognize it, it has a familiar strain. Quietly, then at full volume, you hear the soundtrack from the 1960 's television series Bonanza. Hum along if you like.*

*Jump cut. Scene 3. New image. Vast, black, empty space ... outer space – stars and planets, a shooting star, enormous silence ... Out of this silence, a voice ... Space, the final frontier. These are the voyages of the Starship Enterprise. Its continuing mission is to explore new worlds. To boldly go where no one has gone before.*

*Scene 4. Imagine. A large white boot descends from a silvery ladder and touches the surface of the moon. One small step for man, a giant step for mankind.*

*Scene 5. Fingers poised over grey plastic keys, shoulders hunched in dim light, an uncomfortable chair. The world reduced to a twelve – inch square emanating blue light.*

*At this point, Sleeping Beauty decides to wake up and get busy.*

The rhetoric around digital technologies is infused with the utopian promises of deliverance and progress – the promise of another frontier, an original uncharted space, virgin territory, a clean slate, another chance to "get it right." This notion of the frontier has almost mythic proportions in the language and literature of the west. From the "promised land" offered in the Bible, to the lost Garden of Eden, from Columbus' arrival in the Americas, to the cowboy and Indian films of the 1960s and the space adventure action flicks of the 1980s and 1990s, the notion of the frontier continues to engage the imagination of the west. This adoption of a frontier mentality toward the landscape and vocabulary of cyberspace provokes some interesting observations on how our visions of the future are predicated on the structures of the past.

At a time when resources are diminishing worldwide, when natural frontiers are disappearing, when outer space has proven to be an inhospitable and insupportable environment for human life, cyberspace provides, however fallaciously, the last frontier. The implications are serious, myths of transcendence and separation between the mind and body have a long and complicated history in the philosophical traditions of the west. There is a danger that we will lose our already tenuous and tentative investment in the "real" physical and material world, and abdicate our social and environmental responsibilities.

It is in the area of promises, fairy tales and digital technology that I would like to linger. In the fairy tale of Sleeping Beauty, a kiss from the handsome prince awakens Sleeping Beauty from her slumber to the promise of living "happily ever after." What will wake us from our collective technologically induced amnesia? Will the kiss of technology cure us of all that ails us? Why is it that

the rhetoric around new technologies has appropriated the superlatives usually reserved for television commercials for laundry soap? – bigger, better, 100% improved, brighter, lighter, MORE!

Information technologies constitute a massive ideological intervention in daily life and the importance of artists' participation in shaping these emerging technological environments is crucial. This paper maintains certain assumptions about technology, notably, that it is more than simply hardware, or neutral, that it is shaped by and is a product of forces that are deeply imbedded in economic, political and cultural structures. The ability to address imbalances of power in the use and shaping of technology is dependent on access to technologies such as computer networks and on acquiring the skills and technological experience to use them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Today, I would like to outline some of the cultural and practical applications and implications of the Internet and some of the questions and possibilities that it raises. To look at how artists are using the Internet including a couple of projects that I have been involved with. This desire among artists to explore new spaces is not new - artists and architects have historically been involved in creating new spaces for communication - public squares, castle, churches, public buildings, public art are examples of places created as works of art or featuring works of art.

The practical implications are many and include:

- distribution - the ability to disseminate work across vast geographical distances
- ownership/copyright/intellectual property rights
- issues of accessibility > developing world economics and labour
- communication, lobbying, sharing of information, mobilizing and building communities
- research

Cultural Implications include:

The Internet suggests a shifting set of relationships between the traditional roles of the artist or author with the artwork, with the audience and participants, and an increasingly creative role of software designers and programmers.

- new models of viewing with the potential to transgress received codes of spectatorship,
- potential to change the viewing relationship, broadcast model of television and radio projects out to an audience but does not receive information or dialogue back
- collaborative works, interactivity
- a space for a dissidence which will challenge and rewrite the topographies of a powerful and idealized past.
- need for new vocabulary
- lessening of the differentiation between the registers of the different senses

### **Artists' Use of the Internet**

Given the problematic of access upon which I think any discussion of the Internet needs to be framed, the sheer enormity in terms of numbers of projects that artists are involved in on the Internet is staggering.

### **Communication and Research**

- Involvement ranges from basic - the use of e-mail as a tool for communication, building and maintaining contacts, associations with friends and colleagues, and sharing information - to complex - sites on the World Wide Web. The newsgroups and bulletin boards function (as they do for many other individuals and groups) as a resource for images, sound, technical information, historical data. The Fine Arts Forum and ART Deadlines List, a list server and newsgroup respectively, are groups that provide information on upcoming events, call for entries for exhibitions and conferences, etc.

## Activism/Community

- Another very important area of involvement for artists on the Internet is activism, and the use of the net as a site to create and new communities among geographical distances based on common and shared interests. An example of this is the recent campaign by the Voters Telecommunication Watch and Electronic Frontier Foundation to stop the US COMMUNICATIONS DECENCY ACT of 1995, an act of legislation which has been introduced to the US Senate which would potentially seriously restrict freedom of speech, potentially stop the free flow of information on the net, and require all telecommunications carriers to censor public and private communications.

This particular act places criminal liability on the telecommunications carriers (including traditional telephone networks, Internet service providers, commercial on-line services, and independent BBS's) whenever their networks are used to transmit an material which is deemed indecent or harassing. In order to avoid penalties, carriers would be forced to restrict the activities of their subscribers and censor all public and private communications.

- The impact of the recent Canadian budget on the Canada Council, the major funding body for the arts in Canada, was also released and discussed on the Net.
- In another newsgroup, a campaign was recently mounted against a racist organization found in one of the bulletin boards, "The American Purification Society". Readers were urged to send letters of protest to the group directly, to contact the systems operator at the host site of that newsgroup and to "flame" the contributors.

As a site for projects

- Projects may be divided roughly into two areas: artists who use the Internet as a means to disseminate their artwork and artists who use the Internet as a medium for artwork.
- Wave hello projects  
Artists working in traditional way transmitting and sharing their images over the Internet. Images and texts are sent from place to place or artist to artist and then changed, altered, adapted by that artist and then sent back and forth and onwards.
- proliferation of WWW sites for arts organizations and individual artist's projects
- MOO's as an alternative site for artworks  
(MOO's - multi user domains, object- oriented - are real-time, text based social situations that allow for role playing and interaction)  
New rooms - galleries are added/built to existing Moo structures. This is all done through textual description. Gallery visitors are invited to create their own work, add to the existing work and offer their comments and criticism. In MOO's, artworks consist of textual descriptions of what we might recognize as sculpture or painting or art.  
eg. In a recent exhibition entitled *Bio INFORMATICA* at the Sandra Gering Gallery in NYC artist, John Simon created a virtual gallery in an existing MOO which functioned as described above.  
eg. eCity Cafe - a project which has terminal at Queen Elizabeth Hall in the South Bank London, offers free online service, CD roms plus a MOO entitled Virtual Theatricamoo

\*\*\*\*\*

## Artists' Projects

THE FILE ROOM by New York based, Spanish artist Antonio Muntadas

The File Room is an interactive computer project, basically a computer archive, addressing the issue of cultural censorship, a subject of great concern for the arts and the library sciences. (Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago) The File Room uses the Internet to document individual cases of censorship around the world and throughout history. It does not function solely as an

electronic encyclopedia but as a toll for information exchange and a catalyst for dialogue.

Censorship has existed since time, the earliest case in Western history is said to be the trial of Socrates in 393 BC, when Socrates was found guilty of corrupting youth, denying the gods recognized by the state. The File Room documents cases of censorship, current and historical. It has been online since 1994 and has been accessed by ten of thousand of people from countries as diverse, as Finland, Israel, Brazil, Japan, Australia, Poland.

Public installations include the Chicago Cultural Center summer 1994, Second International Mosaic and World Wide Web presentations in Bucharest, Romania as part of Censorship: A virus in the New Mediascape. The archive continues to grow through on line and mail submissions and is maintained by students. Complete texts of banned books are available.

The File Room is accessed via Mosaic, somewhat limited access since Internet user needs a SLIP or PPP connection for full graphic access to the Web.

Specific cases are accessed through four main categories - date, medium, geographic location, and grounds for censorship.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Nomad Web: Sleeping Beauty Awakes**

My recent work involves processes as diverse as the INTERNET, textiles, drawing and computer generated and manipulated imagery. Increasingly, I have been interested in creating a circumstance with my work, a situation which allows for a variety of levels of participation and interaction. Current discussions around digital technologies posit artworks which are interactive, immersive and which engage the full human sensorium. I am interested in exploring these ideas through basic processes such as drawing and in grounding the technological experience within a rich material and physical environment.

This body of work includes the installations *Speaking Sites: Dialogue, Ingrid and Plato*, a participatory installation which involves transforming the gallery space into a giant chalkboard, *A Nomad Web: Sleeping Beauty Awakes*, an interactive network project, *Seimographes*, a collaborative project involving computer looms and modem lines.

The exhibition with the somewhat tongue-in-cheek title *Dialogue: Ingrid and Plato*, began as a re-thinking of the gallery space: to propose the gallery as a forum for ideas, as a site to create and initiate dialogue, and as an opportunity to work directly in and on the gallery architecture, both literally and metaphorically. The aim was also to question and critique in a somewhat theatrical and potentially humourous way certain assumptions of Western thought. Plato's Socratic dialogues with their emphasis on 'Ideal theories' were used as a model. In this case, the dialogue is a multi-directional exchange between the Western tradition, the architecture of the gallery, myself, the friends and volunteers who work on the exhibition and the visitors. The entire area of the gallery, walls, floor and ceiling was painted in black chalk board paint and was converted into a giant, walk-in chalkboard. I wanted to create a piece that used all the rhetoric that surrounds virtual reality - immersive, participatory, interactive - but using hand technologies.

For most people in the west, the chalkboard has associations to authority and socially sanctioned or conditioned knowledge. But interestingly, it also provides a surface which can continually be written, erased, and re-written, much in the same manner as our public histories as well as our personal histories are continually being re-invented. If authority is invested in domains such as the university, the school, the gallery, the market place, the state, it is necessary that exaggeration, fantasy, and fictions be socially placed within the domains of non-authority: the feminine, the childlike, the mad and the senile. The aspect of closure and who wields the power to erase and to write is key. This power to write and erase can be equated to the power of access or lack of access to the Internet.

Another project, *Nomad Web: Sleeping Beauty Awakes*, which began in 1992, had many of the same intentions - to create an interesting and charged site or space in which a variety of interactions and interventions were possible.

The project, was shaped by a desire to explore this new (cyber)space, to use an existing computer network – Internet – to stimulate discussion, exchange ideas, collaborate on projects and create spaces for voices not normally active in current discussions concerning or involving communications technology. It began in 1992 as an idea among a group of women as a way of participating and collaborating in an artists residency program entitled "Nomad" at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Canada. Our intention was to participate in the residency without actually being there physically, to use the network of electronic communication as another site for the Nomad residency. With this in mind, we set up a newsgroup on the Internet called alt.arts.nomad with the subtitle *Nomad Web: Sleeping Beauty Awakes*.

This project consisted of physical and electronic sites for the purpose of collecting and disseminating ongoing dialogues. Through this project, it was hoped that new and diverse voices would be heard in discussions about technology through access to network communications. Each site was initiated and maintained by women which involved the introduction and training of students and artists and the facilitation of space and events to allow public access.

The physical sites, consisting of bulletin boards and public access computer terminals, which accompanied the more immaterial electronic sites, were an integral part of this project. In various cities across North America<sup>1</sup> bulletin boards were installed so that printouts of the communications and activity on the newsgroup could be made available to a larger public who ordinarily might not have access to computer resources. In addition to posting the ongoing discussions and dialogues on the newsgroup, the bulletin boards also provided information on access to the Internet, available resources on the Internet, and related material.

*Nomad Web* was seen as a forum for the discussion of nomadism in a contemporary context. A nomad transgresses borders, whether philosophical,

---

1

Bulletin boards were installed at: The Walter Phillips Gallery, Banff, Alberta; Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec; CAL Arts, Los Angeles, California; Capilano College, North Vancouver, British Columbia; Side Street Projects, Santa Monica, California.

conceptual or physical. We invited the participants to consider the following questions:

- What does it mean to speak without a body, without visible gender, How does it affect intimacy?
- How do we think about a site as network or conduit rather than a specific location, as a shifting space rather than a fixed site?
- How can nomadic travel be understood as planned and reoccurring cycles or journeys?
- What constitutes community? How do intellectual, ideological, geographical, national, social, political and cultural spheres shape community definitions?
- How is nomadism developing as a philosophy reflecting certain flexibilities or states of flux?
- What happens to issues of place and nation as electronic cultures collapse conventional notions of physical distance and space?
- How does the Internet function as a sphere with its own class structures, language and protocols?

As is often the case, in this project, theory and practice took divergent paths. What I would like to address in this paper is not so much the content of the ensuing dialogues and discussions that took place in Nomad Web, but to examine instead, the process of participating in the newsgroup and to share some observations regarding electronic communication in general.

One of the most striking features of participating in the newsgroup was the sense of participating in a genuinely new form of communication. It is in no sense radically new, rather it is a strange hybrid of oral and written traditions. It shares many characteristics with conventional methods of communication: it shares the immediacy and conversational quality of the telephone, the epistolary potential of letter writing, and the 'dissimultaneity' of a fax or letter, in that communication on Internet bulletin boards does not occur in real time.

Although, communication on the Internet is predominantly text-based, it functions, however contradictory this may seem, primarily as an oral space.

Laurie Anderson has suggested that, "technology today is the campfire around which we tell our stories. There's this attachment to light, to this kind of power, which is both warm, and destructive."<sup>2</sup> Just as in traditional oral communication, digital dialogue relies heavily on the user's memory to carry the threads of previous correspondence. While it is possible to archive and print postings and electronic messages, they have a curiously flat and uninteresting quality once on paper.

This new "frontier" is suspiciously familiar in the extent to which the dominant values of the west seem to be inscribed here. When I post a message on an electronic bulletin board or newsgroup, I am met with the following:

"You are posting to the entire civilized world. Are you sure you want to do that?"

This equation of civilization with technologically rich cultures reveals how a seemingly innocuous question is loaded with cultural values and stereotypes. The adoption of old paradigms in this new space is also evident in the vocabulary of the net and in the language of computers in general. You *kill* a file, you *boot* a disc, you *jack in*. A recent edition of the computer-culture magazine *Wired* features on its cover a photograph of a high-profile computer executive dressed entirely in leather combat gear, an electronic road warrior reminiscent of a Mad Max character, under the imposing headline *Infobahn Warrior*.

The act of naming the newsgroup alt.arts.nomad also revealed how conventional classification schemes and taxonomies are present in and continue to shape the Internet. Newsgroups are named according to a set of protocols. They are organized hierarchically beginning with a general heading, followed by one or more specific headings. Among the major categories are: comp, which stands for computers; rec (recreation); alt (alternative); sci (science); soc (social), and news. For the newsgroup, *Nomad*

*Web*, we settled after much debate, on the name alt.arts.nomad. We decided, after much debate, on the alternative category as the main subject heading since we feared the heading art might seem too exclusive to attract the broad audience of potential subscribers we hoped to engage and that the term itself was too limiting to reflect the breadth of interests and intents in contemporary cultural practices. The inadequacy of traditional taxonomies and the difficulty of naming and defining has provoked a great deal of contemporary theorizing. I am reminded of the passage by the writer Borges, concerning a Chinese encyclopaedia "in which it is written that animals are divided into: a) belonging to the emperor b) embalmed c) tame d) sucking pigs e) sirens f) fabulous g) stray dogs h) included in the present classification i) frenzied j) innumerable k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush l) etc m) having just broken the water pitcher n) that from a long way off look like flies." (Borges) The wonderment of this classification scheme might suggest a model for how artists might work within this space.

Although cyberspace may not prove to be the frontier we are so desperately seeking, it is nonetheless a space well worth exploring. The Internet has enormous potential as a site of resistance that can be used to challenge and re-write the constraints of a powerful and ideological past. Michel de Certeau, in a piece written on the class struggle of Brazilian peasants, suggests a strategy that may be appropriate for the Internet. He suggests that,

using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for manoeuvres of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference. That is where the opacity of a "popular" culture could be said to manifest itself ... that is, the space constituted by others, characterize the subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations." <sup>3</sup>

A wonderful example of this "use of imposed spaces" and "networks of established forces and representation" is the use of the Internet by the homeless in Seattle. In 1983 the Seattle Public Library became the first major American public library to provide free public access to the Internet. It is an irony that those who might be seen as contemporary nomads without physical addresses now have an address in cyberspace.